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HISTORY AND THE SPHINX: OF RIOTS AND UPRISINGS

NONPOLITICS CAPITALISM, CLASS STRUGGLE, REBELLION, RIOT, STRUGGLE, SURPLUS, SURPLUS POPULATION

Riots are the Sphinx of the left. Every soi disant radical intellectual feels compelled, it seems, to answer the riddle they hear posed by the riots of the present, in Bahrain or Asturias, Chile or Britain: *Why now? Why here? Why riot?* These answers generally come in a few simple varieties. First, if the riot seems to lack focus or present clear demands – that is, if it is illegible as “protest,” as in the case of the London riots of summer 2011 – the intellectual will paint them as a “meaningless outburst” (Slavoj Žižek), undertaken by “mindless rioters” (David Harvey). Invariably, attributions of unmeaning must find support in patronizing sociology, rendering the rioters mere side-effects of an unequal society, symptoms of neoliberalism, capitalist crisis and the ensuing austerity. Frequently, such commentary adheres to the flinching rhetorical structure of “yes, but...” In the words of Tariq Ali from the *London Review of Books*:

Yes, we know violence on the streets in London is bad. Yes, we know that looting shops is wrong.

But why is it happening now? Why didn't it happen last year?

Because grievances build up over time, because when the system wills the death of a young black citizen from a deprived community, it simultaneously, if subconsciously, wills the response.

Far worse than such half-hearted apologies is the claim, repeated with alarming frequency by people who should know better, that the rioters in London were acting out the self-contradictory imperatives of neoliberal society. Such commentary is likewise a symptomatic account. For Harvey, the rioters are mere reflections of the rapacity and greed of post-Thatcher capitalism. For the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, looting is simply a violent and risky variant on shopping, an expression of a materialistic consumer society.

Then there are the commentators who see the riots as simply misguided, rather than as reflections of capitalist ideology. Such writers understand the riots as an engine lacking the proper tracks. The failure then belongs to the decrepit left in general, who have failed to provide an “alternative” or “political programme” which might harness, shape and direct the rage of the rioters. Asks Žižek: “Who will succeed in directing the rage of the poor?” Forget the possibility that the poor might be able to direct their own rage.

One can see the fundamentally patronizing lines common to all these responses. In each, the intellectual imputes a kind of false consciousness to the rioters, in order to make himself (and it is usually a *him*) all the more necessary as the voice of missing authority. These intellectuals hear in the riots a question to which they must provide the answer. They do not realize that the riots are, rather, an answer to the question they refuse to ask.

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Alain Badiou is not one to hide from the Sphinx. Nonetheless, he is a paradoxical candidate to address an entire book to the unfolding age of riots. On the one hand, it is entirely sensible: Badiou has maintained an affiliation with militancy from his days as a young French Maoist to his current position as towering maestro of contemporary European philosophy; indeed, he has forthcoming a manual of a sort translated as *Philosophy for Militants*. On the other, there is a curious mismatch between thinker and subject here, caused in part by the incommensurate tempos and tonalities of intellectual position and global crisis. Badiou's thinking, however committed, always preserves a considerable degree of abstraction (as a philosopher, he is most highly regarded for advancing the area of ontology via the rigorous application of set theory).

As a matter of cultural history, however, Badiou's greatest significance lies in his lifelong fidelity to what he has influentially called "the communist hypothesis." In the years following on the fall of the Eastern Bloc wherein communism — as an actually existing politics, theoretical figure, and social desire — fell into global desuetude, Badiou and precious few others husbanded whatever spark remained within intellectual spheres. In this sense he is very much a mirror version of what Pound's great biographer Hugh Kenner called "a man of the vortex," at the center of a history that convulsed and mutated by the hour. Badiou is a man of the desert: a figure of the horizonless interval wherein neoliberal policies, for all their vaunted dynamism, produced an unvariegated political landscape in which serious antagonism was in the main neutralized (certain developments in South America notwithstanding). If history had not quite died, it was looking extremely wan.

By the time that concerned parties met for "The Idea of Communism" conference in 2009 at the Birkbeck Institute, this desert-like micro-epoch was over. Militant struggles against the coiled regimes of capital and state had burst forth unevenly, but something very much like everywhere. They burned bright, they faded, they were brutally repressed or they ate their own tails, but, as a general tendency, they spread. The urgency for philosophers to nurture a theory of opposition in hope of future antagonisms was not abandoned, but of a different time and place. Inevitably (as a thousand "Occupy" conferences testify), intellectuals wheeled to engage this changed circumstance, trooping out of the desert to review the nascent action in the streets — Badiou in prime place among them.

The 2009 Birkbeck conference spawned several books, all of which stake much on the wager that the present period might feature a renewal of "The Communist Hypothesis" and bring to a close the long period of neoliberal reaction that has held since the 1970s. But claims for such a renewal depend only in select instances on observed historical developments, on new forms of communist practice or struggle. More often, they seem to stake their wager on a change in dinner table talk among philosophers — the *idea* of communism, rather than its political practice. This contrasts markedly with the elaboration of communism one finds, for instance, in a book like *The Coming Insurrection*, whose writers base their theoretical elaboration of a new communism on a critical examination of the practices, struggles, and social movements of the last decade. But for those familiar with Badiou's philosophy and his reliance on logical proof, axiom, and argument from first principles, it will come as no surprise that, for him, communist practice follows behind communist idea. The primacy of the idea is unmistakable in Badiou, not least because it appears in majuscule: "Idea," rather than "idea." Glossing his own title early on, he insists that "The only possible reawakening is the popular initiative in which the power of an Idea will take root."

Thus does *The Rebirth of History* use the Arab Spring and other uprisings of the last few years as empirical validation of the more abstract framework developed in *The Communist Hypothesis*. First the Idea, then its emergence in the world. Certainly the relationship between the history and the Idea is more complex than the description above might make it seem, since the "political truths" which form the basis for "the Idea" are produced by history in its unfolding. And yet, at the same time, as much as the Idea is the product of history it also, paradoxically, precedes it: "the Idea refers to a kind of historical projection of what the historical becoming of a politics is *going to be* — a becoming originally validated by the riot." This circular temporality allows Badiou to vacillate between suggesting that the Arab Spring failed for its lack of an enduring Idea, and at the same time facilitated the reawakening of the Idea in the present period.

Between what Badiou calls the "intervallic period" of capitalist restoration beginning in the 1980s and a new revolutionary political sequence animated by the Idea lies the riot. *The Rebirth of History* is essentially a grammar of riot, using recent events to distinguish between those riots which produce "political truth" and those which do not. Badiou, a tireless fashioner of categories and schemata, here taxonomizes riots into three types, discussed in order of ascending political significance: the "immediate," the "latent," and the "historical." Whereas the "immediate," anticop riots of the poor like the ones that took place in the UK during the summer of 2011 or the French *banlieues* of 2005 are classed as reflexive outbursts of unfocused violence, "anarchic and ultimately without enduring truth," the historical riot which we witnessed with the Arab insurrections exhibited a capacity to endure and generalize.

Unlike most of his contemporaries, Badiou has the virtue at least of examining riots from a strategic rather than a moral

perspective, and spying something within them other than a maddened reenactment of capitalist consumption. That is, unlike Harvey, Žižek, Ali, and Bauman, he takes the riot as something more than a manifestation of “culture,” more than an expression of an underlying social truth which it cannot help but affirm, for all its burned cars and looted shops. The questions which Badiou hears uttered by the Sphinx of riot are the correct ones: How do we generalize and extend the offensive capacity of the riot? How and why do riots spread and become open insurrection?

Though we hesitate at Badiou's distinction between immediate and historical riot, it's worth commending the way in which he measures the extension of the riot in terms of spread in physical space and across social categories. Whereas, in Badiou's account, the immediate riot extends from the banlieues of Paris to those of Marseille, or from London to Manchester council estates, it does so via the medium of a single social category: young proletarian men. The historical riot, however, exhibits a categorical extension, spreading among men and women, the young and the old. Badiou is mistaken when he asserts that “immediate” riots are composed entirely of young men – the arrest records from the British riots say otherwise, and numerous riots so-defined in the past decade have significantly involved women, the elderly and kids, though perhaps not in proportional numbers. Still, it is absolutely essential to understand how riots and insurrections come to involve (or remain limited to) different social groups. One thing that decisively distinguishes the Egyptian insurrection from, say, the UK riots is that, largely as a result of the Tahrir encampment, there were numerous ways to participate in the uprising that did not involve direct combat with the police and their proxies. This contributed not only to the expansion of the insurrection but its durability. Nonetheless, it is not enough for an insurrection to be composed of people other than young men if the relationship between social groups continues to follow the established division of labor in capitalist society – with men fighting the police and women doing the work of caretaking, for instance, or proletarians fighting and middle class people attending assemblies and making important decisions. We have to examine not only how an uprising spreads among different social groups but how it undoes (or perpetuates) the violence of such categories.

Moreover, Badiou's very distinction – between immediate riots that rise and die as if in a single shout, and historical riots that take root in the soil of time – excludes dramatic events with which any serious study of riot must reckon. Thus, for example, the broken parade of riots that have rocked Thessaloniki and Athens go entirely unmentioned. It is a scandalous omission. These riots are, it must be admitted, hard to schematize. Are these, according to Badiou's taxonomy, only an unconnected sequence of immediate riots? Perhaps each instance is immediate: episodes rarely last as long as, say, the Los Angeles riot that greeted the Rodney King verdict in 1992 (also unmentioned). Certainly, in the Greek case, the triggering event was, as is characteristic of Badiou's immediate riot, the police murder of a young man. But it is impossible to speak of “the Exarcheia riot of 2008” except in the way one speaks of Book One of Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*: it was inarguably a beginning, and thus an element of a larger unity. The Greek riot has kept unfolding, unevenly but continuously as months turn into years, addressing itself now to the cops, now the banks; now the supermarkets, now the parliament. Its protagonists, for better or worse, are often young male anarchists and/or students. At the same time it has leapt beyond this demographic, filling Syntagma Square with broad swaths of the *polis*, often getting their first taste of tear gas.

This is scarcely Badiou's only omission, but it is a telling one. Just as the matter of its duration eludes Badiou's taxonomy, the Greek riot cannot seem to disclose whether it possesses or lacks the Idea. What has provisioned its serrated persistence, its half-expressed capacity for generalization which, for all its tidal shifts and incomplete nature, is not a trivial fact? If the situation has a constant, it is not to be found in the realm of concept; surely it is the violence of austerity policies, traversing social categories. Or to tilt back toward the register of theory, it will turn out that all riots happen *in* history, subject to material forces. Rather than insisting, Glinda-like, on asking, “are you a good riot or a bad riot?” we might take the opportunity to understand the ways that the Greek situation is tellingly distinct from that of Egypt or the U.K. – and particularly how they find themselves in different places in the structure of global crisis, commingled each with divergent trajectories of local political management.

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That said, we must grapple with what Badiou has written, not with what he has not. Salutary in his account is the direct disavowal of the political party and its conjunction with the state, now definitively obsolete as a mechanism for a revolutionary project: “The party-form has had its day, exhausted in a brief century by its state avatars.” This has been the philosopher's (non-)party line for some time, and surely he means to provide an opening to grasp what might be provisionally new about the political volatility of the present. But it is on this point that Badiou and the book founder absolutely. For, still in thrall to the guiding Idea, he continues to assume and demand of us the very activity most closely identified with the party-form: organization: “Anyway, it remains the case,” he writes, “that, by formalizing the constitutive features of the event, organization makes it possible for its *authority* to be preserved...Organization transforms into political law the dictatorship of the true from which the reality of the historical riot derived its universal prestige.”

So: for Badiou, the Idea has in some sense replaced the party. Or, there is a triangle of riot/party/Idea, and it must now be the Idea rather than the party that shepherds the riot from immediate to historical, to communism. However, being itself immaterial, the Idea will require some manner of practical activity to realize itself down here – and that activity looks a lot like what the party once did. “I maintain that the time of organization,” he writes in a summary chapter, “the time of construction of an empirical duration of the Idea in its post-riot phase, is crucial.” Behold the Dictatorship of the Idea.

The exhortation to organize has been often heard in the dissolution of the various Occupy encampments here in the US, from left thinkers as various as Noam Chomsky, Doug Henwood, and Jodi Dean. And “organize” must in some regard be the right thing to do, in so far as it is a term both common-sensical and capacious in its lack of specificity. It risks being what Fredric Jameson calls a “pseudoconcept”: the imperative to “organize” comes down to, *do that thing that causes you to be more rather than less effective*. But lacking any further tactical clarity, the word inevitably backslides into the meaning it offered the last time around, redolent of sad-faced activists trying to sell you copies of *Socialist Worker*. In the face of this vast and mercurial irruption which Badiou’s book wishes to register, the call to “organize” serves for the moment as the chorus to a paradoxical song: *this new politics is fantastic, but it seems to have reached its limits; we need...the old politics!*

Badiou’s communism thus drives itself straightaway into the ditch separating new from the old: “at a distance from the state,” but still fundamentally oriented toward hoary ideas about the state’s withering away. Though “organization” no longer means a party capable of seizing state power and directing its military and bureaucratic power toward particular programmatic ends, it does mean that “[y]ou decide what the state must do and find the means of forcing it to, while always keeping your distance from the state...” And yet this orientation toward the state – regardless of its reliance on telekinesis rather than direct contact – reproduces the primary weakness of the riots and uprisings of the present, the very thing it seeks to overcome. Whether or not they feature explicit demands, these riots are always heard by the state and powers-that-be as practical calls for reform: “Mubarak must go!” and “No more austerity!” are how the uprisings of Egypt and Greece sound in paraphrase. This has less to do with the ideas actually held by participants, who may indeed have anticapitalist and antistate aspirations, than it does with their particular strategic and tactical choices: massing in the square defensively, for instance, or attacking the parliament building on the eve of an austerity vote. Even the supposedly “meaningless” violence of the London riots gets heard as a call for reform, for amelioration of poverty, social exclusion, and the racist harassment of the police.

It is unclear, then, what solution Badiou’s call for “organization” might provide to the limits of the historical riot, which he rightly notes “does not by itself offer an alternative to the power it intends to overthrow.” The dubious case of “Latin American socialism” and the sloganizing of the antiglobalization movement notwithstanding, no such alternative has yet emerged in the 21st century. We might wonder, instead, if the very concept of *an alternative* belongs to the now-outmoded politics of party, state and program. In the 20th century, “alternative” always meant an *alternate form of modernization and industrialization* – modernization under socialist (or fascist) conditions of political control and distribution. Past revolutionary ideas of the future depended on a conception of an alternate course of development. But such futures are gone. There are no creditable images of the century to come that are not formed of nightmare and ruin, however much the Shanghai skyline tries to tell us otherwise. Everyone dreads the future. Which means that we might need to revise our very conception of what “revolution” and “alternative” mean.

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Perhaps, then, the very immediacy of the immediate riot might have more to teach us than it appears. Badiou approaches for a moment the truth of immediacy when he refers to “the thrilling sense of an abrupt alteration in the relation between the possible and the impossible” which will be familiar to any partisan of the riot. But, as one might by now expect, he retreats instantly into political abstraction, musing on the “de-statification of the issue of what is possible.” Here he leaps over the actual experience of riot, and in so doing, what might be learned from it: first there is the realization that there are too many of you for the police to control, and then the immediate leap to suspecting that you might also be free from the discipline of the market, the wage and commodity, and the world organized by these alien powers. Rather than a form of extreme, high-risk consumerism, the looting of stores during a riot is perhaps one of the clearest examples we have in the present moment of communist *practice*, without which the communist idea can mean nothing. Indeed, we would aver that communism can mean at this point only the elaboration of practices that remove the things we need and want, the things we make, from behind the cordon of property – a cordon in defense of which millions are daily condemned to starvation, disease, imprisonment and a thousand forms of suffering besides.

Though it should go without saying, let’s remember that consumerism depends on *paying for things, with money earned by working*. Looting a pair of shoes depends upon *hatred* of the commodity form and its relationship to social class, not enthrallment to it. This is why, during riots, commodities are as often wantonly destroyed as they are seized for consumption. **As Guy Debord wrote of the immediate riot of Watts in 1965:**

once the vaunted abundance is taken at face value and directly seized...real desires begin to be expressed in festive celebration, in playful self-assertion, in the potlatch of destruction. People who destroy commodities show their human superiority over commodities ... Once it is no longer bought, the commodity lies open to criticism and alteration.

This is the “enduring truth” that survives beyond the immediate riot.

Rather than moralizing in the face of some acts of antisocial violence which, while deplorable, occur during times of riot as well as times of social peace, we might examine the immediate riot from a strategic perspective: How can such acts of expropriation and free taking be extended and deepened, and what other practices might go along with and help the extension of these expropriations? How do more and more people become involved in the unfolding of the riot, and what measures will be necessary in order to defend against the consequent violence of the state? Organization, in this sense, means something very

different than Badiou intends. Rather than a mechanism for the reproduction of the Idea, it becomes a means for the elaboration, diffusion, and coordination of practices which contain ideas within them, and from which other as-yet-unknown ideas will blossom. It is notable that Badiou has nothing to say about the establishment of kitchens and street clinics, improvised cell phone charging stations and displays of art in places like Tahrir Square. These are indeed the kinds of organization – forms of mutual aid and free giving – which might help extend the free taking of the riot, and enable the passage from riot to open insurrection. This in turn might give us cause to rethink the kernel of the Occupy movement now that it has reached its first anniversary: not the insertion of new terms into the national discourse, not the call for a less-poisoned political apparatus, not even the registration of the current catastrophe's dimensions, but the tentative and partial and still-powerful experiments with self-organized care, defense, and provision.

At stake in the foregoing critique are not just ideas about how social change emerges, but ideas about the role of ideas, and the various intellectuals who might shepherd them, within emergent struggles. Standing on its head Marx's statement that "Mankind only sets itself such tasks as it is able to solve," Badiou writes that "History does not contain within itself a solution to the problems it places on the agenda." The solution he imagines emerges from beyond history, from the rational process of the Idea and its faithful adherents, who translate the truth of present struggles into winning organizational structures and disciplines. Though we find good reasons to balk at Marx's optimism, we nonetheless cannot see any place from which the solutions might emerge if not from the practices of the riots and uprisings and struggles of today. Rather than seeing theory as a lesson we must teach to the participants of today's uprising, we might see it as something immanent within what they do. We might adopt a listening posture with regard to the world we live in. The answer to the riddle of the Sphinx is always another question.

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